# THE HIGH ART OF QUALITY FRIVOLITY

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Probably no sort of man anywhere sustains a greater shock than the carefree young assistant professor of English who having, as he thinks, got clean away for a free day or so at SAMLA suddenly realizes that his department head is giving the presidential address and that in the common courtesy so much admired by department heads in such circumstances assistant professors ought to attend. And when he further realizes that not only must he be at the luncheon and suffer the speech but that he must pay out four dollars to do so—or if with wife, eight dollars—then he may have the feeling that the great globe itself has faded, leaving not a wrack behind.

Now, although I consider his observance of common courtesy only right and just and the expenditure for lunch and speech a far, far better one than a rash young man might make left to himself, still I cannot suppress a pang of gentle pity at his wan face and discouraged manner as he slumps there beside his dishes. If I were to oppress him now with some solemnity from my scholarly specialty (which is Renaissance pneumatology) this once lighthearted assistant professor might lapse into a drowsy numbness, paining his sense as though a hemlock he had drunk. For whatever it is worth, therefore, though it be only a friendly gesture, I am laying off the pneumatology and speaking instead—briefly—on a contemporary author whom I consider the ablest producer of quality frivolity since Gilbert cooperated with Sullivan, an author whom a very respectable authority not long ago declared to be the "most illustrious living novelist born in England." I mean, of course P. G. Wodehouse. If you want my credentials for speaking on Wodehouse, I can only say that I confidently claim to be the foremost unpublished authority on him to be found in Athens, Georgia.

If you happen to be yourself a devotee of Wodehouse you may have noticed that I have unblushingly lifted an item or so from him already. So to lift and so to notice are the signs of the devotee, of the man who has found an antidote to *The Naked Lunch* and much else that he reads, and who uses it freely.

I am assuming that most of you have at least a hearsay acquaintance with Wodehouse. Maybe you have heard of Bertie Wooster, inept and loveable London clubman, and of Jeeves, his

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gentleman's gentleman, wonderfully suave, well-informed, and resourceful. Or of Lord Emsworth, the absent-minded owner and sponsor of the great pig, Empress of Blandings. Or of Mr. Schnellenhamer, a wide-beamed Hollywood impresario, comfortable in his sports clothes that look as though tailored for him by Omar the Tent-Maker. If the name Wodehouse is strange to you, though, I hope that you will take my word for it, along with that of George Orwell and a dozen others of his pentetration, that here is an author who may be worth your while.

Mr. Wodehouse is now ninety years old, has published innumerable short stories and more than eighty novels, and holds an honorary degree from Oxford. He has had also some less favorable recognition. Sean O'Casey, who himself tended to the serious, once called Wodehouse "British literature's performing flea." Readers whom persistent levity offends do not like Wodehouse. And those who, though sometimes amused by levity, take no humor seriously but that which stresses a dark view of the world may like Wodehouse but not regard him.

We devotees, though, hold that Wodehouse's work is literarily important even though nearly all lighthearted. We take it to be of a kind with the lighter but still virtuous parts of Chaucer's work and Shakespeare's. Like those two, Wodehouse exhibits many men's comic flaws without making any man an outcast because of them. He does not scant the fact that some of his characters are scoundrels, snobs, stupes, drones, or worse; but he likes them all, does justice to them all, and brings none to a fate that is vile. For the receptive reader he maintains a marvellous equilibrium of pleasure among persons that are more diverting and more harmless than we ever meet in real life yet are nevertheless faithful, after their literary kind, to a sort of reality. We can always recognize their humanness.

You may gather that I think well of the Wodehousean atmosphere, the high comedy effect, and the deft (if stock) characterization. I think well, too, of the plotting and the structuring, which, in the short stories especially, everybody admits to be masterful, and of the swift pacing which Wodehouse maintains even when he seems most leisurely. But the real heart of his success is in the detail of his work. The exact word time after time unpretentiously brought forth; the snappy image; the polished sentence; the neat use of literary quotations, semi-quotations, and allusions. The rest of this paper I will give to examples of the Wodehousean texture, starting with some of his levies on well-known predecessors. I sincerely hope that they will cheer my pitiable young assistant professor.

An agitated nephew striving unsuccessfully to interrupt an uncle who is a non-stop talker had been, says Wodehouse, for some moments "squeaking and gibbering like the sheeted dead in the Roman streets a little ere the mightiest Julius fell." Another young man, fallen into reverie in a barber's chair, was taken advantage of with scented unguents and left the shop "so perfumed that the winds were lovesick of him." Of another, who had just received alarming news, Wodehouse says that "only the fact that he had brilliantined them kept his knotted and combined locks from parting and each particular hair standing on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine."

Wodehouse himself usually quotes accurately, but some of his characters can get the lines a little wrong. Thus Colonel Egbert Wedge on his daughter's stalled love affair: "She reminds me of that girl in Shakespeare who . . . . How does it go? I know there's something about worms, and it ends up with something cheek. Of course, yes. 'She never said a word about her love, but let concealment, like a worm i' the bud, feed on her damned cheek.' "

And Mervyn Potter, bibulous star of stage and screen, took a certain liberty with a well-known speech from *Macbeth:* " 'Is it a bottle that I see before me, its handle toward my hand?' asked Mervyn Potter, interested, 'Or is it but a bottle of the mind, a false creation proceeding from the heat oppressed brain? . . . Come let me clutch thee.' "

As you may judge from these specimens, Wodehouse inclines to Shakespeare for quotations. He can use other poets too, though, notably the English romantics. In a golf story the hero achieves a fantastic hole in two: "One of those lucky twos which, as Jack Nicklaus once said to Arnold Palmer, seems to stain the white radiance of eternity like a dome of many-colored glass." And in a book that features a vintage butler: "The child," says Keggs, "is father of the man, sir." Keggs' interlocutor, though conceding this, is dissatisfied with the man they are speaking of. "That child should have been drowned in a bucket at birth. Then he wouldn't have become a man. But no one will adopt these simple home remedies nowadays."

Keats has his inning. The rich Mrs. Steptoe from California has rented an English country house as an instrument toward making a gentleman of her uncouth husband, a former preliminary box fighter with squashed nose and ears. She has hired our hero, an amiable young man named Josh Weatherby, to serve the cause as Steptoe's valet. For complex reasons that I will not touch upon, Josh and Steptoe find themselves in the role of burglars entering through a window into a living room where, unfortunately, Mrs. Steptoe is lying in wait. It was an embarrassing moment for Mr. Steptoe, but not for Josh, a youth of admirable invention and aplomb. To

Mrs. Steptoe's acid question about what they think they are doing breaking into the house, Josh replies smoothly.

" 'I am afraid, madam . . . that I am wholly to blame for this untimely intrusion. Lying awake in bed just now, I happened to hear the nightingale and, feeling that Mr. Steptoe ought not to miss this treat, I woke him and suggested that he should accompany me into the garden.'

" 'Oh!'

" 'Yes, madam. We could not see what flowers were at our feet, nor what soft incense hung upon the boughs, but we managed to catch a glimpse of the bird, did we not sir?'

" 'Yeah,' said Mr. Steptoe. 'It was a whopper.' "

Although I could from the whole body of Wodehouse's work collect a considerable gallery of quotations, still I cannot say that quotations are anything like thick-sown there. Wodehouse, no doubt, is unwilling to overtax his reader's literary I.Q. A much more frequent enriching device in his work than quotation is the journalistic cliché used for an effect of blandness: "to sit down around a table and explore every avenue," "not wholly devoid of human instincts," "arrived at man's estate." Bertie Wooster says that when he was a child they once dressed him as a rabbit, and "the shame was indescribable." A male lover held that he spoke with "fearless honesty" in telling the female that her new hat made her look like a pekinese dog. Another lover, brainless but devoted, banished from the house by a shrewd father, would stand before the girl's window in the golden dawn, and "he would blow a silent kiss and she would blow a silent kiss and he would tell her with the language of the eyes that his heart was still hers."

Sometimes two clichés box a bit of straightforward dialogue. Thus a pair of scheming young people dismally considering their chance of sinecures with an unwilling Hollywood impresario:

" 'Maybe his heart will melt.'

" 'He hasn't a heart.'

" 'I'd like to wring his neck.'

" 'He hasn't a neck either.'

"They fell into a moody silence, musing on Ivor Llewellyn. The man seemed armed at all points."

Or consider Lord Ickenham at ease in a bar parlor narrating out of a free-wheeling imagination how he had once slain a puma in the Amazon hand to hand. He admits handsomely that it was rough on the puma. "I remember noticing at the time," he says "that the animal's eyes were wet with unshed tears."

This mention of pumas reminds me that Wodehouse is very strong in animal imagery. A stout mother climbing flights of stairs in her children's interest, stops and stands "puffing like a seal after diving for fish." An aficionado of mystery novels who can't get to sleep because he has lost his copy of *Strychnine in the Soup* finds that "already his brain was lashing itself from side to side like a wounded snake." And finally, a nicely mixed one about a suffering Freddie Widgeon, said to resemble "a toad beneath the harrow." "It seemed to Lord Ickenham that the toad raising a haggard face to his was a toad who spoke in riddles."

Of the verbal mixtures—puns, malapropisms, spoonerisms, and the like—Wodehouse makes only sparing use, but he does have some. Bertie Wooster says of his eccentric friend, Gussie Finknottle, that he was always babbling of "syncopated newts." "Palmated newts, sir," corrects Jeeves. On another occasion a young lady, deeply stirred, leaves Bertie groping when she heatedly characterizes her fiancé to him as a "mere uncouth Cossack." "A cossack, I knew," muses Bertie, "was one of these things clergymen wear." And Gertrude Butterwick, confronting her own fiancé with blazing eyes, loses a good deal of value from her accusation when she gets her syllables transposed and calls him a "Hickaprit!"

Sometimes Wodehouse has a run of dialogue that plays innocently upon simple words. Thus:

" 'You don't mean that!' gasps Monty Bodkin.

" 'Don't mean what?'

" 'Well, when I said 'You don't mean that!' I didn't mean you didn't mean it, I meant . . . well, what I mean to say is . . . .' "

Or more elaborately, an exchange between Bradbury Fisher and his skeptical mother-in-law. Bradbury claimed to have been at the office. A gang, he said, had been trying to hammer down his stock. " 'Today I fixed them.'

" 'You did, did you,' said Mrs. Maplebury.

" 'I said I did,' retorted Bradbury defiantly.

" 'So did I. I said you did, did you?'

" 'What do you mean, did you?'

" 'Well, you did, didn't you?

" 'Yes, I did.'

" 'Yes, you did!' said Mrs. Maplebury."

Wodehouse's sharper characters are inclined to score off less nimble speakers by literal enforcement of verbal signification. When an elderly female cousin who has just become engaged to the butler says that she doesn't know if she is standing on her head or her heels, Lord Ickenham recommends that she "sift the evidence. At which end of you is the ceiling?"

Another time another woman "was looking at Lord Ickenham as if he didn't come up to her specifications.

" 'I thought you were younger,' she said.

" 'Younger than what?' asked Lord Ickenham.

" 'Younger than you are.'

" 'You can't be younger than you are, worse luck,' said Lord Ickenham. 'Still, one does one's best.' "

Sometimes Wodehouse puts a reverse twist on this device of verbal enforcement by having a stodgy character display a literal-minded obtuseness about metaphor. " 'Ah, well,' sighed Frederick, 'all flesh is as grass.' 'No it isn't' snapped retired Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer Bastable. 'I've seen flesh and I've seen grass. No resemblance whatever.' "

It would be idle to claim that Wodehouse does not expect us to admire the agile mind of Lord Ickenham more than the ossified one of Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer Bastable. Lord Ickenham is a situation-saver, and the general is a butt and a snob. Wodehouse loves them both, as human beings and grist for his mill, and he does not spare Lord Ickenham the occasional authorial observation that indicates full awareness that he is not only a situation-saver but a trouble-maker. Nor does Wodehouse neglect to display the sound qualities of the unimaginative. He has been said to have some pet dislikes and to indulge them in his work, and indeed he does make fun of policemen, big game hunters, and soldiers. But he is quite as hard on men of more discriminating professions than these: interior decorators, tenors, lawyers, and poets.

Wodehouse has even been said to dislike the English common man, and every other kind of Englishman. At least one critic claims that Wodehouse actually *hates* England and all that moves within it.

Such a statement is absurd, for though Wodehouse has many a caricatured Englishman, he has plenty of Americans and Frenchmen treated as sharply. For none, however, of any sort has he animus. His policemen, granted, are usually slow and a little grotesque, his soldiers irascible and opinionated, his big game hunters thick-headed. As for his lawyers, they are desiccated men and suspicious. One of them enters a room in "that wary manner peculiar to lawyers, looking from side to side as if expecting to see torts hiding behind the curtains and misdemeanors under the piano." But one of Wodehouse's most loyal and sympathetic characters is a hunter, and his lawyers are dry and suspicious because, he sufficiently lets it appear, the world of the brainless and the irresponsible has drained and worn them. As for the common man—the proletarian, anyway—Wodehouse does incline to use him in rather an old-fashioned way, very much like Shakespeare's, for comedy that we view tolerantly from above. Thus Wodehouse makes game of the vocabulary of a transatlantic steward who explains to Monty Bodkin that the "highly copperising things" a lively movie actress has written on his stateroom wall were done with lipstick and so are "indeliable." But always Wodehouse is gentle and friendly. He uses aristocrats with quite as much sense of their foibles as of those of commoners. Lord Tidmouth, caught in blue-blooded ignorance, confesses equably that "they didn't teach me much at school, just the difference between right and wrong. There is some difference, but I've forgotten what."

If Wodehouse is hard on any category of men it is the artistic, especially writers, painters, and critics. "Gladys Bingley was better known as the Sweet Singer of Garbidge Mews, Fulham—a charming girl who looked like a pen wiper." In the same bohemian community Cyprian was an art critic of the sort that toys with a side whisker, moves his head about, makes funny art critic noises and asserts that in a good painting the color must "have a flatness, a gravity, shall I say an aroma?"

Wodehouse rather inclines to suspect serious writers of pretentiousness and self-centeredness. A much deferred-to Russian novelist came to tea with a literary club and wrecked most of its preconceptions about both literature and life. Hearing another Russian novelist praised, he glared fiercely behind his whiskers. Then "down in the forest something stirred. It was Vladimir Brusiloff's mouth opening. He was not a man who prattled readily, especially in a foreign tongue. He gave the impression that each word was excavated from his interior by some up-to-date process of mining. He allowed three words to drop out of him. 'Sovietski no good!' He paused for a moment, set the machinery working again, and delivered five more at the pit head. 'I spit me of Sovietski!' " A little later he spit him of Nastikoff and then summed up. " 'No novelist any good except me. , . . I spit me of zem all.' "

This passage is, of course, deliberate farce and not at all a display of prejudice against serious literature. To drive home the farce Wodehouse has Brusiloff conclude, "No novelist anywhere any good except me, P. G. Wodehouse and Tolstoy not bad. Not good, but not bad."

Now, I have not forgotten that though this is the year of the SAMLA president from English, a very large proportion of members are in the modern foreign languages and that even an English president ought to do them some grace. Many an English president might consider his obligation discharged with the little bit from a Russian speaker that I have just quoted, but I gladly go the extra mile and give further specimens of foreigners speaking English and even of Englishmen speaking foreign. Thus, Monty Bodkin on the Riviera wears the "shifty hangdog look which announces that an Englishman is about to talk French." His fiancée had told him that he must practice his French.

" 'Er, garsong, esker-vous avez un spot l'encre et une piece de papier,—note papier, vous savez—et une enveloppe et une plume?'

"The strain was too great. 'I want to write a letter,' said Monty. . . . The waiter bounded off like a retriever to return a few moments later with the fixings.

" 'V'la, m'sieur! Zere you are sir,' said the waiter." (His girl had told him that when on the Riviera he must be sure to practice his English.) " 'Eeenk—pin—pipper—and a liddle bit of bloddin pipper.'

" 'Oh, merci,' said Monty. 'Thanks. Right ho.'

" 'Right ho, M'sieur,' said the waiter."

Wodehouse lived in France for years and speaks the language like a native, I am told. So he can't really be categorically ridiculing either French or those Englishmen who try to speak it. But in them, as in almost everything, he sees fun.

Well, I feel that I have hardly touched Wodehouse's many virtues or displayed his heaped up riches. But I have done my thirty minutes of SAMLA presidential duty and not, I hope, embarrassed my predecessors or my hearers with frivolity. Like Wodehouse himself, for the time being at least, I speak evil of no man and wish all well—especially my assistant professors, now released from their suffering.